

BICYCLE RIDING IN SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

“Sharing the Road”

The bicycle is the most common form of mechanical transportation in the world. It is recognized as a form of efficient, clean and quiet transportation. In many countries like Denmark, the Netherlands and China, bicycle commuters far outnumber motor driven commuters; worldwide, bicycling is second only to walking as the dominant means of transportation.

The modern multi-speed bicycle was invented in the 1890s. The bicycle became so popular that the first paved streets and roads in this country were designed for the bicycle. Shortly after the introduction of the multi-speed bike, the horseless carriage rolled onto the scene. As the early automobile made its way onto urban streets and country roads, the bike vs. car tension began. A new issue emerged: Can the bicycle and the automobile safely exist together in harmony? Today in the US, as the automobile dominates the roadways, the tension is greater than ever, and there is still the issue of safety.

ORIGIN

The Grand Jury feels an inquiry into the safety of bicycle use in San Luis Obispo (SLO) County is warranted. After observing numerous bicyclists failing to follow basic traffic laws, members of the Grand Jury were concerned about the safety of cyclists in the County.

AUTHORITY

California Penal Code §925 states: “The grand jury shall investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments, or functions of the county including those operations, accounts, and records of any special legislative district or other district in the county created pursuant to state law for which the officers of the county are serving in their ex officio capacity as officers of the districts.

METHOD

The Grand Jury’s research included:

- o Interviews with local law enforcement agencies and the California Highway Patrol

- ⊖ Interviews with a local cycling club and cycling advocates
- ⊖ An interview with a representative of the San Luis Obispo County Bicycle Advisory Committee
- ⊖ An interview with a representative from the San Luis Obispo County Bike Coalition
- ⊖ Interviews with San Luis Obispo County Public Works staff
- ⊖ Review of the California Vehicle Code Sections covering bicycle operation
- ⊖ Review of statistics in San Luis Obispo County regarding fatalities, injuries and personal property damage related to bicycle accidents
- ⊖ Review of League of American Bicyclists 'BikeEd' bicycle safety course
- ⊖ Review of funding sources for bicycle safety programs and infrastructure
- ⊖ Review of the Federal Highway Administration Safe Routes to School Program

NARRATIVE

San Luis Obispo County is one of the premier bicycling areas in California. The county's weather, gorgeous scenery, rolling terrain, and relatively low automobile traffic volume attract cyclists from all over the state and the country.

Share the Road — For over a century, motorists and bicyclists have vied for the finite amount of space on roads and streets. The automobile has replaced the bicycle as the dominant means of transportation in this country. Yet the efficient, flexible and environmentally sound bicycle continues to fight for its place on public streets and roads.

Some motorists perceive the streets and highways as conduits for motorized traffic, and see cyclists as an impediment. On the other hand, some cyclists defend their intrinsic right to use the roadways but believe compliance with some traffic laws is only meant for motorized traffic. Both sides of this debate complain that it slows them down.

According to the Federal Energy Information Administration, nearly 63% of the oil we consume is to power cars and trucks. In an effort to reduce oil consumption, government agencies and environmental and transportation experts encourage the adoption of transportation alternatives. Bicycles are praised as a culturally and environmentally healthy mode of transport.

Bicycle use will continue to grow as an integral component of our future transportation system. The automobile culture will encounter many more bicycles on the streets and roads (keep in mind that over 95% of cyclists also drive cars).

Retail bicycle sales have seen a modest increase in the past two years. Sales of large automobiles are down substantially, and small, fuel-efficient car sales are booming. The key to coexistence is learning to share the road legally and respectfully.

Bicycle Accident Statistics — Following is a table displaying the bicycle-related accident statistics in the unincorporated areas of the County. The data source for the table is page six of the 2005, *County Bikeways Plan*.

Bicycle-Related Accident Statistics in Unincorporated Areas of SLO County							
5-Year Blocks*	Accidents #	Bike at Fault #	Bike at Fault %	Auto at Fault #	Auto at Fault %	Other Fault %	Fatalities #
2000-2004	65	31	48	25	38	14	0
1995-1999	82	54	66	21	26	8	2
1990-1994	128	102	80	23	18	2	2
# = Number % = Percent							

* No figures for 2005 available.

Analysis of the table, *Bicycle-Related Accident Statistics*, indicates that the number of bicycle accidents has declined 49% in the last 15 years. The statistics for accident responsibility reveal that cyclist fault dropped by nearly 70% while automobile fault increased 8%.

Based upon complete data from the 15-year period from 1990 through 2004, there is a strong trend toward increased bicycling safety. The data show a steady and dramatic decline in cycling accidents and cyclist-caused accidents in the last fifteen years. Whether the reduction is a result of improved safety education, more effective regulation or public awareness, cycling is safer today than 15 years ago.

Education — Few of us can forget the joy in receiving our first bicycle. Yet, how many of us remember being taught our new bike was a vehicle; and we had the same rights and responsibilities as any motorist behind the wheel of a car? How many of us were told the new bike was not a toy but a mode of transportation? Most our parents told us to stay out of the way of cars and stop at stop signs.

Today, many Americans still see cycling as a means of recreation rather than serious transportation. The League of American Bicyclists (founded as the League of American Wheelmen in 1880) offers a series of comprehensive cycling safety courses for every skill-level and age of rider. This series of courses (BikeEd) provides bicyclists and motorists alike with the essentials for safe cycling. The San Luis Obispo Bicycling Club (SLOBC) offers this quality training to the public at no cost. For years, the SLOBC has been providing free helmets to juvenile riders as another commitment to safe cycling. The San Luis Obispo Bike Coalition offers additional bicycling safety training. The SLO Bike Coalition is an organization of cycling advocates and a variety of bike-friendly, local businesses that promote increased walking and bicycling for daily transportation and recreation. Every two months the Bike Coalition teaches a safety course for experienced cyclists.

Ideally, teaching safe bicycling must start with elementary school age children. Children must be taught that when bicycles are ridden on streets and roads, they are vehicles not toys. Some local schools in the county allow a child to ride a bike to school only after the child first passes an annual “bicycle safety test.” Some schools offer “bike rodeos” which test the young participants’ bike handling skills. Unlike “BikeEd,” the programs fail to teach essential bicycle safety and the concept of “being visible, predictable, and legal” to young cyclists.

The benefits of vehicle safety training can be remarkable. For example, in 1988, California implemented a mandatory motorcyclist safety-training program. In the first nine years of the training program, California saw a 67% drop in motorcycle crashes and a 69% drop in motorcycle crash fatalities. California and national highway safety experts credit this pre-

licensing safety-training program and mandatory helmet laws as the basis for the major reduction in motorcycle fatalities.

Bicycle clubs and coalitions are working constantly to educate cyclists to be safe riders. Judging from data presented in the *Bicycle-Related Accident Statistics* table, these groups appear to be meeting with some success.

Enforcement — Bicyclists, like motorists, are required to obey all traffic laws. Every person riding a bike on a street or highway has all the rights, and is subject to all the rules applicable to the driver of a motor vehicle (Vehicle Code 21200). This means stopping at stop signs and traffic lights, signaling before turning, staying far to the right as a slower vehicle, etc. Bicycles ridden at night are required to have reflectors and ample lighting. Smart night-riders go beyond what is required, by wearing reflective clothing and ensuring they are readily visible front, back and sides.

Ask almost any motorist if he or she has seen a cyclist disregard a traffic law and you'll likely get a positive response. Ask almost any cyclist the same question, substituting car for cyclist, and you'll get the same response. The Grand Jury heard testimony from law enforcement personnel, bicycle advocates, local bike club members and motorists. All agreed: numerous cyclists disregard the traffic laws to a degree that creates a hazard for them and, to a lesser extent, motorists. The most common traffic citations issued to cyclists in the City of San Luis Obispo are (1) running stop signs and traffic lights, (2) no helmet, (3) riding on sidewalks and (4) wearing earphones.

Interviews revealed enforcement of traffic laws with regard to cyclists is not a top priority for local law enforcement agencies or the California Highway Patrol (CHP). Limited law enforcement staffing is the biggest obstacle to enforcing of traffic laws regarding cyclists. The limited supply of traffic officers cannot meet the enforcement demands of cyclists and motorists. As a result of recent state budget cuts, local law enforcement agencies have had to reestablish enforcement priorities.

To the ire of many motorists and frustration of many cyclists, automobile traffic consumes most of the traffic-related law enforcement. There is good rationale behind prioritizing traffic enforcement on cars rather than bicycles. If an auto runs a red light or a stop sign, causing an accident, the odds are the accident is more likely to result in multiple injuries and major property damage. On the other hand, if a cyclist runs a red light, and an accident occurs, it is likely the only injury is to the cyclist.

On occasion, in response to citizen complaints, the City of San Luis Obispo has targeted cyclists for increased traffic enforcement. The result was a minor increase in bicycle compliance coupled with a major increase in complaints, from both cyclists and motorists, that the police were ignoring motorist violations and unfairly targeting cyclists. For the City of San Luis Obispo, it was a ‘no-win’ exercise.

Engineering the Infrastructure — Currently, the County of San Luis Obispo owns and maintains over 100 miles of bikeways. Since 1992, over 50 miles of bikeways have been added to the county’s inventory of bike routes.

Maintenance of bike lanes typically consists of sweeping road debris (broken glass, rock, sand, etc.) from the bike lanes and surface repair (potholes, washouts, cracks, etc.). Bike lane maintenance is either done on a scheduled or an as-needed basis. To the cycling community, bike lane maintenance is absolutely critical in providing and sustaining a safe and viable bike route. Broken glass, debris and road surface irregularities can cause a bike rider a flat tire or a serious fall. If a bikeway is littered with debris or is too rutted or cracked for safe bike handling, the cyclist is forced to ride in the traffic lane (legal for cyclists in cases like this), which can be dangerous for both motorists and cyclists. Bikeway maintenance is most often mentioned in complaints and lists of cycling community needs. Clean, well-maintained bikeways are essential to safe bicycling.

Providing enough shoulder width for bike lanes on rural roads is not always possible. In cases where there is no shoulder or where road conditions make a bikeway impractical (gravel surfaced roads), cyclists have little or no separation from traffic lanes. Bike lanes are typically marked

with a stenciled bicycle, and often streets and roads have signage cautioning motorists of cyclist presence. Signage is needed on all roads without bikeways, warning both cyclists and motorists to use caution and share the road.

Each year, local bicycle clubs and cycling advocates provide the County with a list of issues that concern the cycling community. That list, “Unmet Bike Needs,” consists of infrastructure projects and maintenance-needs which local cyclists identify as important to safe bicycling. Of the 34 items on the current list of cycling needs, nearly half are maintenance issues. The remainder is requests for bikeways, or portions thereof, to be constructed between communities or areas of concentrated population activities. The County currently has a list of 109 bikeway projects to be constructed, most of which have been on past cycling needs lists.

The County Public Works Department and the San Luis Obispo Bicycle Advisory Committee (a SLO City cyclist advisory group) meet on a quarterly basis to review cycling-related issues, including progress on the “Unmet Bike Needs” list. The Bicycle Advisory Committee provides oversight and policy direction on matters related to bicycle transportation in San Luis Obispo and its relationship to bicycling outside the city.

Funding and Promotion — The Grand Jury examined a number of legislative bills, regulations, and programs that provide funding or support for bicycle use. According to the 2005 *County Bikeways Plan* funding sources include:

- ⊖ State gasoline taxes — This is a source of revenue that is expected to decline over time as more fuel-efficient cars are used and as a result of state budget shortfalls.
- ⊖ General Fund — Not a reliable source as expenditures in other areas of government increase.
- ⊖ Local sales tax and assessment districts — Not reliable, as both require public support for tax increases and assessments.
- ⊖ Transportation legislation — The California legislature provides a moderate level of funding for traffic projects throughout the state. Grant funding includes money for

transportation, traffic safety, and bikeways projects. However, obtaining these grants is a highly competitive process.

An example of a transportation legislation program is the Bicycle Transportation Account (BTA). The 2006-07 BTA program provides approximately \$5 million for bicycle projects. Local agencies can only submit one application and compete on a statewide basis for these funds. Competition for BTA funds is significant. In 2001 the State of California received over \$29 million in requests for BTA funding, but only 25% of those requests could be funded.

- o Air quality mitigation — California and county coalitions provide a moderate level of grant funding for alternative transportation and clean air projects. In southern SLO County, an air quality impact fee is administered by a coalition of county agencies. The fee generates revenues to support transit improvements, park-and-ride lots and bicycle facilities.
- o Clean Air and Transportation Act — In 1990 an initiative ballot measure to fund a variety of alternative transportation projects, including bikeways. The SLO County region received \$10 million to divide among the county and the seven incorporated cities. The voters have defeated subsequent similar bond measures, so it is unclear whether there is a reliable future in this type of funding.
- o Development impact fees and developer extractions — Both of these funding approaches rely on new development but only to the extent of mitigating the impacts of development. New development can only be charged for the impacts it creates, not for correcting any existing deficiency. When construction and need for new roadways are triggered by development, the developer is required to construct the roadways and bikeway facilities.
- o Parks, trails and user fees — Meant to directly assess users; this funding source has not been successful. Bicycle registration and use fees have, for the most part, not been successful because of enforcement difficulties.

Safe Routes to Schools — The once common sight of children walking or riding bicycles to school has all but vanished in many communities. The Federal Highway Administration offers these statistics: up to 25 percent of morning commutes consists of parents driving children to school. Fewer than 15 percent of all school trips are made by walking or bicycling, one-quarter are made on a school bus, and over half of all children arrive at school in private automobiles.

According to the California Dept. of Health Services, pedestrian/auto accidents are the second leading cause of fatal injuries among 5-12 year-olds; bicycle crashes are fifth. Children and seniors are at greatest risk of injury as pedestrians and cyclists. Traffic experts list two fundamental reasons: (1) unsafe traffic speeds and (2) inadequate or no sidewalks or bikeways. The purpose of the Federal Safe Routes to School Program (SRS) is to address these issues head on, with the support of the California Department of Health Services, CHP and the California Bicycle Coalition

The SRS program, administered by the CHP and Department of Transportation, grants the state the authority, “...to use federal transportation funds for the construction of bicycle and pedestrian safety and traffic calming projects.” With transportation funding available specifically for this purpose, many communities all across California are implementing SRS projects.

Both Canada and England have seen remarkable success in the implementation of SRS. The installation of bike lanes, raised pedestrian crossings, and traffic calming have cut traffic speeds considerably, making conditions much safer for pedestrians and cyclists. Bicycle use tripled in two years and bike parking capacity doubled. Reduced residential zone speeds (now 20 mph) resulting in a 70% reduction in child pedestrian injuries and a nearly 30% reduction in child bicycling casualties.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: Bicyclists are required to obey all traffic laws. Every person riding a bike on a street or highway has all the rights and is subject to all the rules applicable to the driver of a motor vehicle. (Vehicle Code 21200)

Finding 2: Law enforcement agencies set higher priority on enforcement of motorized traffic. There are so many more cars than bicycles, and the consequences of a traffic accident while driving a car are likely to be significantly more serious than those involving a bicycle.

Finding 3: Testimony revealed substantial state funding cuts have forced the SLO Police Department to reduce traffic enforcement by 40% in recent years. The funding cuts have impacted the County Sheriff's Department as well. (The CHP is required to enforce traffic laws on unincorporated roads as well as state highways.)

Finding 4: Providing enough shoulder width for bike lanes on rural roads is not always possible. There is too little signage on roads without bikeways, warning both cyclists and motorists to use caution and share the road.

Finding 5: There was unanimous agreement among local cycling club members and cyclists interviewed that too many cyclists fail to follow basic Vehicle Code regulations. Cycling groups from the League of American Bicyclists to SLO Bike Club encourage tough enforcement of traffic laws for cycling violations.

Finding 6: Although there is real need for bike safety programs for all cyclists, there are a limited number of bicycle safety programs in SLO County.

Finding 7: There is an ongoing need for additional bikeways and maintenance of existing bikeways. Although there are a number of funding sources for bikeways and safe cycling projects, development of cycling and pedestrian friendly infrastructure is expensive. The competition for these funds is fierce.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Working with local cycling groups and the Bicycle Advisory Committee, local law enforcement agencies and San Luis Obispo County should generously support the countywide implementation of the "BikeEd" program or similar bicycle safety training program. Support may be monetary, venue provision, advertising, staff assistance, etc. or other in-kind services. (Findings 1, 5 & 6)

Recommendation 2: The County should continue to actively seek funding for bikeways and bike and pedestrian safety construction projects and programs, such as the “Safe Routes to Schools” program. (Findings 6 & 7)

Recommendation 3: Law enforcement agencies should implement target enforcement programs aimed at improving cyclist compliance with traffic regulations to insure public safety. (Findings 1, 2, 3 & 5)

Recommendation 4: Motorists and cyclists alike would travel safer if narrow, rural roads were marked with permanent signage warning both cyclists and motorists to use caution and share the road. (Finding 4)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

California Penal Code §933 requires that comment on the findings and recommendations in this report be submitted to the presiding judge of the Superior Court by the:

- **The San Luis Obispo County Public Works Department: Due 7/21/06 (Findings 4 & 7 and Recommendations 1, 2 & 4)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Sheriff’s Department: Due 7/21/06 (Findings 1, 2 & 5 and Recommendations 1 & 3)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors: Due 8/23/06 (Findings 1, 2, 4, 5 & 7 and Recommendations 1 through 4)**
- **The San Luis Obispo City Police Department: Due 7/21/06 (Findings 1, 2, 3 & 5 and Recommendations 1 & 3)**
- **The San Luis Obispo City Council: Due 8/23/06 (Findings 1, 2, 3 & 5 and Recommendations 1 & 3)**

CONCLUSION

Bicycling accident statistics indicate that bicyclists are riding safer today than they were 15 years ago. There is still a need for cyclist safety training and enforcement of traffic laws as they apply to the bicycle rider. Educating the bicyclist to ride safely and share the road with motorists

should start with youngsters. Teaching our children that bicycles are vehicles, to be operated accordingly, is the key to bicycle safety.

The Grand Jury believes school districts should teach safe cycling, like the nationally certified “BikeEd” safety course, through the use of local resources like the San Luis Obispo Bicycle Club. The approach need not use additional classroom or staff time. Bike safety courses can be taught by League of American Bicyclists certified trainers during established physical education times in three to four classes per school year

Furthermore, the Grand Jury encourages school districts to implement the local “Safe Routes to Schools” program in their respective communities. The daily ritual of parents delivering their children to school exposes children to the hazards of traffic, air pollution and a lack of physical activity. The SRS program includes the “Walk to School Day,” funding for crossing guards, reducing traffic congestion, learning traffic safety skills, separating drop-off areas to protect children who walk or bike, and other useful ideas. The California Department of Health Services and the California Safe Routes to School Clearing House are the program contacts.

Law enforcement agencies establish their enforcement priorities based on staffing levels. There is greater demand for enforcing traffic laws for motorists rather than for cyclists. Limited staffing is the biggest barrier to enforcement demands from both cyclists and motorists

As the number of automobiles and bicycles increases, it is necessary for motorists and cyclists to practice tolerance and patience toward each other. Traffic jams and fuel prices can act as a catalyst for a new wave of cycling. Using a combination of education, enforcement and engineering increases awareness and improves infrastructure, allowing everyone to share the road.